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ABSTRACT

To determine what children and parents know about nutrition, a survey of 772 adults was conducted in 1989 and a survey of 407 children in fourth through eighth grades was conducted in 1991. Results indicated that: (1) almost all children recognized that exercise is important to good health and that the food they eat can affect their future health; (2) children's awareness of the basic food groups surpassed that of adults; and (3) children, like adults, knew that balance, variety, and moderation are the keys to healthy eating. The findings revealed that children are getting the right messages about the basic principles of good nutrition, but that children may be mimicking some adults' fears and misperceptions about healthy eating. When it comes to food selection, children have the most influence over, and may prepare their own breakfast and snacks. Almost half the children said they usually select their own lunches. Nearly three-quarters of the children reported that their mothers made most dinner selections. Almost 9 out of 10 children reported that they eat meals with their families at least 3 to 5 times a week. The majority of the children cited school and their parents as sources of information about food and nutrition. (HOD)

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IFIC REVIEW
International Food Information Council

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How Children Are Making Food Choices

Eating habits developed during childhood have the potential to last a lifetime, making children an important population for nutrition education. Yet more data is needed on the nutritional knowledge of children in order to design effective educational programs that will help them develop good eating habits. The International Food Information Council (IFIC) and The American Dietetic Association's National Center for Nutrition and Dietetics commissioned the Gallup Organization to find what kids really know about nutrition. Children in the fourth through eighth grades (ages 9 to 15) were surveyed, with questions focusing on their attitudes, beliefs and sources of nutrition information. This data can be useful in developing nutrition education materials and programs that will build upon the knowledge children already have, and correct some of the misperceptions as well.

In 1990, IFIC and ADA commissioned a similar Gallup survey, "How Americans Are Making Food Choices," that examined adults' knowledge about nutrition. Throughout this Review, comparisons will be made between the two surveys.

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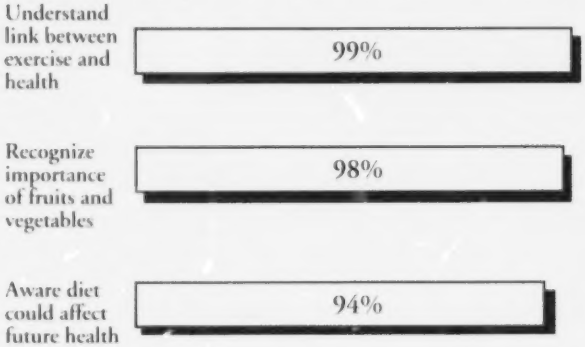
Kids' Nutrition Knowledge

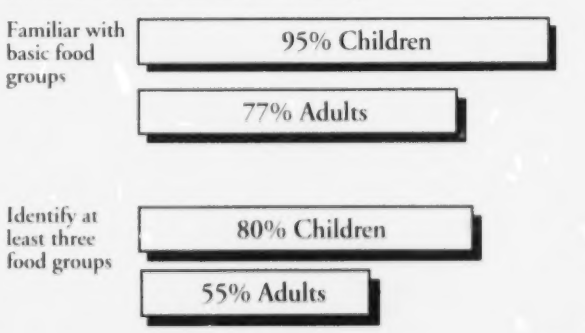
Children have an excellent understanding of the principles of nutrition and health. Almost every child (99 percent) recognizes the importance of exercise to good health and that the food they eat can affect their future health (94 percent). Ninety-eight percent recognize the importance of eating plenty of fruits, vegetables and high-fiber foods, such as whole-grain breads and cereals.

Overall Knowledge about Health and Nutrition Principles



The majority of the children surveyed also have a high level of awareness of the basic food groups. Ninety-five percent are familiar with the food groups and 80 percent are able to identify at least three of the food groups correctly. In the 1990 survey of adults, only 77 percent were familiar with the food groups and 55 percent could name at least three. Thus children's awareness of the basic food groups surpasses that of adults by 22 percentage points.

Awareness of the Basic Food Groups



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In addition, children, like adults, know that balance, variety and moderation are the keys to healthy eating. For example, nearly all of the children surveyed (97 percent) agree it's okay to eat foods such as ice cream, chips and cookies, but not all the time — demonstrating their understanding of balance. Kids also seem to have a grasp on the concept of variety. Ninety-six percent say that trying new foods is good for you, and 84 percent say it's best to eat small amounts of many different foods and not too much of any one thing. And only 18 percent say it's okay to eat anything you want, whenever you want, an example of moderation.

The level of knowledge demonstrated in the survey indicates that nutrition education efforts are reaching children. Most likely, children are learning about nutrition in school, becoming one of the better nutrition-educated segments of society.

Most Children Know the Keys to Healthy Eating Are Balance, Variety and Moderation.

BALANCE

97% Say it's okay to eat foods like ice cream, chips and cookies–but not all the time

VARIETY

96% Say trying new foods is good for you

84% Say it's best to eat small amounts of many different foods and not too much of any one thing

MODERATION

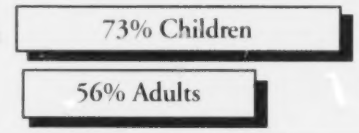
18% Say it's okay to eat anything you want, whenever you want

Despite the high level of knowledge of the basic principles of nutrition, kids may be mimicking adults' "all-or-nothing" attitude about healthy eating.

Of the adults surveyed in 1990, two-thirds said they select foods based on "good" or "bad" perceptions, rather than the fundamentals of balance, variety and moderation. Eighty-five percent of the children agree eating healthy means avoiding all high-fat foods and 77 percent agree that foods with large amounts of sugar should never be included in a healthy diet. In reality, diets should be judged based on the combination of foods consumed over time, not on the basis of individual foods.

In addition, some nutrition messages may create worry rather than educate. Survey results indicate that children may overreact psychologically to some messages. Almost three-quarters (73 percent) report they worry about fat and cholesterol. In 1990, 56 percent of the adults surveyed said they worry about these things. These fears and misperceptions held by adults appear to be influencing children.

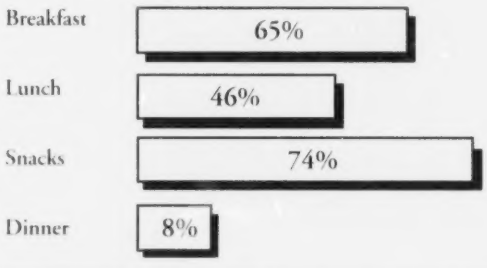
Children May Overreact to Nutrition Messages



Food Selection

Parents should have a wide selection of healthy foods on hand since results show kids have influence over what they eat. According to the survey, kids have the most influence over breakfast and snacks, with two-thirds (65 percent) usually choosing foods for breakfast and 74 percent often choosing their own snacks. Almost half (46 percent) usually select their own lunches, but when it comes to dinner, only eight percent say they make food selections. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) report that their mothers make most dinner selections.

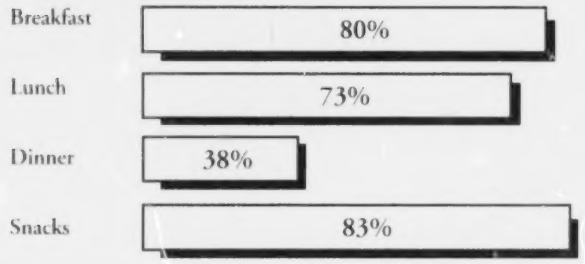
Children's Influence Over Meal Decisions



Kids are active in food preparation and purchasing. The majority say they cook or make some of their own meals (87percent), sometimes prepare their own snacks (83 percent) and cook or make their own breakfast (80 percent). Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) ever cook or make their own lunch, but only 38 percent ever cook or make their own dinner.

More than half say they ever are involved in buying food for their own meals or snacks (57 percent), and about one-third ever buy food for their family's meals

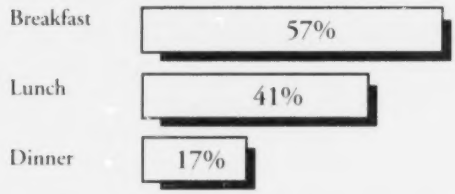
Children Sometimes Prepare Their Own Meals



or snacks at some time (35 percent).

Meal skipping behavior was also explored in the survey. Results indicate that kids, like adults, will occasionally skip meals, especially in the morning. More than half (57 percent) say they have skipped breakfast and 41 percent say they have skipped lunch. Only 17 percent report ever skipping dinner.

Children Sometimes Skip Meals

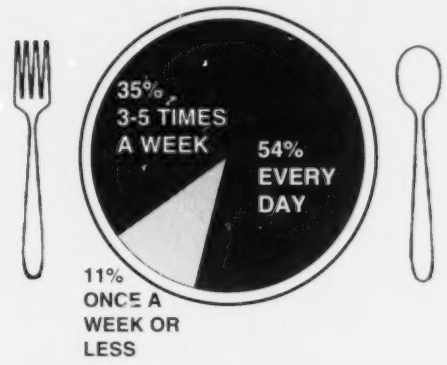


Family Dining

Not all families are eating on the run, as some may believe. According to the survey, almost nine out of ten children (89 percent) say they still eat meals with their families at least three to five times a week, with 54 percent saying they eat with their families every day.

Family dining also seems to have a positive influence on how kids rate their own eating habits. Three out of five respondents (60 percent) who rate their own eating habits as excellent or good, say they eat with their families every day. Of those who rate their diets as fair or poor, only 44 percent say they dine with family members daily and 38 percent report that they do so three or five times a week. Regular family dining presents an opportunity to teach children to eat a wide variety of foods in moderate portions — the basic principles of good nutrition.

Frequency of Family Dining



Sources of Nutrition Information

Children were asked where they get their information about food and nutrition. The majority cite school (95 percent) and their parents (86 percent) as sources. Seventy-three percent say they rely on doctors and nurses and more than half (57 percent) say they learn about food and nutrition from books.

Children were also asked to rate the sources in terms of usefulness. Health professionals were rated highly, with doctors and nurses mentioned very useful by 80 percent, and registered dietitians rated very useful by 71 percent. These results are similar to the 1990 survey of adults.

Sources/Value of Nutrition Information

	Sources of Information	Advice Very Useful	Rank*
School	95%	58%	4
Parents	86%	61%	3
Doctor or Nurse	73%	80%	1
Books	57%	48%	5
Television	49%	22%	7
Magazines	45%	25%	6
Registered Dietitian	28%	71%	2
Friends	19%	19%	8

Conclusion

This survey shows that children are getting the right messages about the basic principles of good nutrition: balance, variety and moderation. But registered dietitians, parents and teachers must continue nutrition education efforts to build on their basic understanding. Kids shouldn't be worried or uptight about nutrition, but should be guided in translating their knowledge into food choices that fit together in balanced overall diets that meet guidelines for good health.

10 Tips to Healthy Eating

The International Food Information Council and The American Dietetic Association's National Center for Nutrition and Dietetics have developed a nutrition brochure based on the Gallup survey of children's knowledge. Written on a fourth-grade level by registered dietitians, "10 Tips to Healthy Eating for Kids" helps children make wise food choices and shows them how to enjoy healthy eating by applying the basic principles of good nutrition — balance, variety and moderation.

The brochure encourages children to make healthy eating fun by balancing food choices and experimenting with new foods. Tips on exercise, snacking and evaluating the diet also are included.

Consumers who wish to receive a free copy of "10 Tips to Healthy Eating for Kids" should send a self-addressed, stamped, business-sized envelope to: Kids Tips, P.O. Box 1144, Rockville, MD 20850. Contact IFIC for information about multiple orders and camera-ready art for duplication.

IFIC/ADA Consumer Brochure

1. Eat lots of different kinds of foods each day.
2. Eat more whole-grain breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables.
3. Keep moving to stay in shape.
4. Start your day with breakfast.
5. Snack smart.
6. Balance your food choices so you don't eat too much of any one thing.
7. Be adventurous
8. Set healthy eating goals.
9. Remember, foods are not good or bad.
10. Make healthy eating fun.

Survey Methodology

The survey was conducted in July 1991 by The Gallup Organization, Inc. for the International Food Information Council and The American Dietetic Association. Survey results are based on telephone interviews of a national random sample of 407 fourth through eighth graders (ages 9 through 15) living in the United States. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributed to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus 4.9 percentage points.

The IFIC/ADA 1990 survey of adults was conducted in December 1989 by The Gallup Organization. Results were based on telephone interviews of 772 adults, 18 years or older. Statistical procedures enabled the results to be projected to the total U.S. adult population at a 95 percent confidence level with a sampling error of plus or minus four percentage points.

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